DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 191 881 TM 800 504

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TITLE U.S. Office of Education Policies Toward ESEA, Title I Evaluation Utility: Changes in Attitudes, Changes in Platitudes.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (64th, Boston, MA, April 7-11, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitude Change; *Compensatory Education; *Educational Assessment; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; *Federal Programs; *Program Evaluation; School Districts; State Departments of Education; Technical Assistance
IDENTIFIERS *Elementary Secondary Education Act Title I; Office of Education; *Title I Evaluation and Reporting System

ABSTRACT

Policies of the United States Office of Education (USOE) pertaining to the utility of Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS) are discussed, as well as the effect of clarification, expansion, or revision of these policies on procedures. In order to facilitate the implementation of the TIERS, USOE has initiated a system of regional Technical Assistance Centers (TACs), which provide consulting services to state and local educational agencies. In addition, the USOE has published Title I evaluation technical standards which explicitly define the areas of technical rigor and the rationale behind these choices. An agenda for generally improving Title I evaluation and for enhancing their utility can be implemented only when the target audience has developed some basic skills and expertise which will allow them to understand and correctly carry out more broadly focused assessments than is provided for by only adopting a TIERS model. Furthermore, a commitment to the notion that evaluation can provide critical information which can and should be used in reviewing the effectiveness of programs is also essential. (Author/RL)

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U.S. Office of Education Policies Toward ESEA, Title I Evaluation Utility: Changes in Attitudes, Changes in Platitudes

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TM 800504

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Boston, April, 1980.

Abstract

The ESEA, Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS) is now in its first year of nationwide implementation. USOE has developed the TIERS, which consists of several evaluation models, reporting forms and support documents, for the purpose of providing valid evaluation information at all three levels of Title I administration -- local, state and Federal. In order to facilitate the implementation of the TIERS, USOE has initiated a system of regional Technical Assistance Centers, which provide consulting services to state and local educational agencies.

Perhaps the major focus of debate about the Title I evaluation effort is on whether or not these evaluations are proving useful at the local level. The authors maintain that the achievement impact information obtained through TIERS, while often useful in its own right, can be extremely valuable when considered as the basis of a full-scale evaluation effort. The experience of four years of evolution of the Title I technical assistance program seems to indicate that the extent to which narrowly-focused evaluations either prove useful in leading to program decisions or lead to more widely aimed evaluations is a function of many factors, some of which are traditionally overlooked: the existence of some information about how the program is functioning that will serve as the basis for initial dialogue and question generating, the inherent believability of the data, the emergence of similar achievement patterns over several years, and the provision of such information in understandable ways to different audiences.

U.S. Office of Education Policies Toward ESEA, Title I Evaluation Utility: Changes in Attitudes, Changes in Platitudes

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Predicting that future debates over the merits of Title I evaluation will rage ever as fiercely as past debates would not cause many ripples at a psychics' convention. However, predicting that Title I evaluation activities nationwide will soon be yielding valid and informative data to Federal, state and local program personnel sounds as improbable as if one were proclaiming that the authors of this paper will sweep first and second places in the Boston Marathon. But in fact, some reasonably valid and thought-provoking information has begun to emerge from the early implementations of the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System (TIERS).

Substantial strides have been made in the state-of-the-art of Title I evaluation across the country, and even more notable gains have taken place in the state-of-the-practice of such evaluations. The purpose of this paper is to present a discussion of U.S. Office of Education (USOE) policies pertaining to the utility of Title I evaluations, and how clarification, expansion or revision of these policies, by themselves, do not necessarily effect any intended changes in procedures. An agenda for generally improving Title I evaluations and for enhancing their utility can be implemented only when the target audience has developed some basic skills and expertise which will allow them to understand and correctly carry out more broadly focused assessments than is provided for by only adopting a TIERS model. Furthermore, a commitment to the notion that evaluation can provide critical information which can and should be used in reviewing the effectiveness of programs, is also essential.

Some background about Title I evaluation, redux, for by now the story is a familiar one. (For a more thorough treatment of the checkered history

of Title I evaluation consult McLaughlin, 1977 and Rossi et al., 1977)

The 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act contained a requirement that all programs operated under Title I must be periodically evaluated. Early attempts to synthesize the results of those locally conducted and State-collected evaluations concluded that the information was impossible to summarize in a way which provided a national snapshot of the Title I program. The data were far too divergent in terms of quality, quantity and focus.

These early misadventures did not go unnoticed and prompted many to analyze and debate the cause of such unsatisfactory results. Cohen (1969), for example, postulated legislatively based sources of inadequate Title I evaluations. Noting that responsibility for carrying out evaluations was delegated to State and local education agencies, he concluded that "It was not hard to see, in 1965, that this was equivalent to abandoning much hope of useful program evaluation." (p.143)

The persistence of this condition led to the inclusion of Section 151 (now Section 183) in the Education Amendments of 1974, P.L. 93-380, which required USOE to develop evaluation procedures to be used by local education agencies (LEAs) and State education agencies (SEAs) in a way that would yield comparable statewide and nationwide data on the effectiveness of Title I programs. USOE was also directed to provide technical assistance in support of this effort.

Under contract to USOE, RMC Research Corporation undertook the difficult task of developing a set of evaluation models, reporting forms and support documents and materials. During the course of this project, each State was visited (as were three LEAs within each State) to assess their current evaluation practices and to determine how disruptive a proposed

system might be to SEAs and their LEAs. The combination of models, implementation requirements and reporting system, referred to as the Title I Evaluation and Reporting System, or more commonly as TIERS, had a slow development/ implementation process. By the summer of 1976, the preliminary work on developing the ideas and implementation procedures behind each of the basic models had been completed (Bessey, Rosen, Chiang & Tallmadge, 1976(a),(b); Tallmadge & Wood, 1976) and relatively widely disseminated -- yet, at the time of passage of the Education Amendments of 1978, P.L. 95-561, the RMC-USOE models and reporting system had still not been implemented nationwide.

From the beginning, the development of the models and reporting system spawned debates on technical and programmatic issues with an intensity that made pre-1974 arguments appear serene by comparison. To some extent, these debates have continued or resurfaced with predictable regularity. It seems notable that this latter criticism arose in opposition to a system that would attempt to provide uniform evaluative information, the lack of which had generated so much criticism prior to 1974. An entire issue of Education Evaluation and Policy Analysis (March-April, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1979) was devoted to Title I evaluation, and contained several articles (Barnes and Ginsburg, Jaeger, and Linn) criticizing both the technical aspects of the RMC models as well as the premise that the data generated via these models would be useful to State and local Title I personnel.

However, with the continued absence of sytematic and uniform evaluative information on the Title I program, other early criticisms persisted. Citing Milbray McLaughlin (1975) and echoing the pessimism that Cohen (1970) had stated almost ten year earlier, Rossi (1979) remarked that ... "The nation's school systems have been remarkably effective in sabotaging all efforts to find out what it is that Title I funds are being used for." (p. 27)

Commenting on the general state-of-the-art in evaluation, Rossi observes that while evaluation practice is not all that great now, it was much worse in the recent past. He suggests that even now, it is too often "... impossible to find out such simple facts as where programs are located, how many people are being served, and what services are being rendered." (p.22). One cause of this problem, he feels, is that a reporting system is "... either non-existent or set up in such a fashion that the information cannot be retrieved," and provides an example at the expense of Title I as he ventures that " ... no one knows with any certainty where the money dispensed under ESEA, Title I went or for what it was used." (p.22) However, with the publications of the NIE's Survey of Compensatory Education and the release of some of the early volumes of USOE's Sustaining Effects Study, a much better picture of the operation of Title I has emerged, especially with regard to the expenditures of Title I funds.

Paralleling the development of the Title I evaluation and reporting system was the establishment of ten Technical Assistance Centers (TACs). The TACs, inaugurated in October, 1976, were initiated in response to stipulations in the Education Amendments of 1974 requiring USOE to provide such "technical and other assistance" as would be necessary to enable State and local administrators to adopt the models and reporting procedures.

The main objective of the TAC effort is to help SEA and, at their at their direction, LEA personnel to evaluate effectively the impact of their Title I programs. While early TAC efforts tended to focus on assisting SEAs and LEAs to understand the guidelines and procedures behind TIERS, and to set up pilot districts willing to try and implement the newly-developed models, in fact TAC services have never been restricted to TIERS-related activities. It has always been the intention of USOE (though this perception may not have been universally communicated or understood) to design a technical assistance program that would operate effectively at many

levels, depending on the needs of the clients. In doing this, the TACs were designed to fill three gaps which Guba (1969) considered to be responsible for impeding progress in educational evaluation, specifically: (a) lack of evaluation procedures and approaches differentiated by levels of use; (b) lack of mechanisms for organizing, processing and reporting evaluative information; and, (c) lack of trained personnel. But given the generally poor condition of Title I evaluation (of course, some Title I evaluators perennially did an excellent job of documenting the procedures and impacts of their programs), the general lack of well-trained personnel who were charged with the responsibility for examining their Title I programs, and the limited evaluation resources of SEAs and most LEAs, much of the TAC activities were spent in providing orientation training regarding the models and reporting system. SEA personnel in particular perceived, as their most important priority, that they obtain some mastery of what the TIERS required so they would be able to fulfill their legislative and regulatory mandate when necessary, and help their districts be able to do the same. To a large extent, the notion that the TACs were to provide general evaluation training and upgrading of SEA and LEA capacities was premature, at least until the basic mandates were fulfilled.

But even with, and arguably because of, a focus on TIERS, the technical assistance program and their network of clients has evolved dramatically over the course of the last four years.

1976, the year in which the models were first disseminated widely through the fledgling TACs and through RMC's own efforts can be categorized as the "year of orientation." The vast majority of training activities that SEA administrators, as well as LEA administrators, encountered when attending orientation workshops during statewide sweeps pertained to the new models and associated reporting system. The reception of these models ranged, across the country, from quite enthusiastic to quite hostile.

Most of the hostility stemmed from the attitudes that the TIERS relied exclusively on standardized achievement tests (which is not true, though it does rely on converting test results into a common metric linked to national norms), or that TIERS did not really provide for any evaluation information which would be useful at the local level. This last attitude is still somewhat pervasive. Perhaps USOE did itself a slight disservice by historically referring to the models as evaluation models, rather than as test score analysis models. The incorrect inference often made was that USOE intended that evaluation should consist exclusively of aggregating results from tests. In fact (as specifically discussed in the preamble to the October 12, 1979 publication of the ESEA Title I Evaluation Regulations), USOE encourages "SEAs and LEAs ... to evaluate all of their project objectives and to collect whatever data are needed for local decision making." But in 1976, this was still a ways off.

In 1977, a new emphasis came into prominence -- 1977 can be termed the "year of the technical issue." Debate raged nationally over such previously nonexistent issues as the validity of the equipercentile assumption, the phenomenon of regression effect error and the need for separating pretesting and selection, the possibility of curvilinear regressions in Model C and the comparability (or lack thereof) of NCE scores. A whole new vocabulary and set of concerns had come into being.

By 1978 the object of most intense discussion and activity in Title I evaluation shifted for the first time to a concern not directly a part of TIERS, that of quality-control in school-based educational evaluation. As first promulgated, TIERS consisted of paper-and-pencil forms. But several analyses of state-level data produced in this manner revealed that, while the actual results of any given local evaluation may or may not be biased, it was almost impossible to identify districts that correctly completed the

data scoring, data transformations and analyses. In particular, errors in using test publishers' norming tables to convert scores from the raw score metric to the percentile metric were nearly universal in districts that relied on teachers or clerks for scoring. This eye-opening revelation, in an area which had received very little public debate previously, led to a number of initiatives jointly undertaken by TACs, SEAs, LEAs and USOE. These initiatives included the development of computer programs that scored and screened data to improve their validity, the development of hand-calculator based data analysis routines, the introduction of optical scan sheet scoring systems, etc. After implementing these procedures in different regions, SEAs and LEAs came to believe, for the first time, that the test information they were now receiving was accurate and that the evaluation results based pm this information were not so easily disregarded.

Following all this widespread work on teaching people about the TIERS, the technical underpinnings of the models and the procedures that could be implemented to increase the validity of the resultant information, attention was directed toward making 1979 the "year of local utility." To repeat, even though USOE had directed the TACs from their inception to provide services in the area of helping to design broader evaluations than would be possible through only applying a model, such services were, in fact, little in demand until almost 3 years later. As is illustrated by the discussion that follows, it appears that making evaluation useful locally requires far more than good intentions. (The full range of USOE-supported activities to enhance the usefulness of Title I evaluations has been discussed earlier at the 1980 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, in a paper presented by Fishbein, Anderson and English.)

In response to LEA and SEA requests for guidance in the area of using evaluation results, a subcommittee of Technical Assistance Center

staff was formed into an Evaluation Use Committee. From the very first, two different perspectives on how to proceed emerged; one school (the Bean-counters) felt that the best approach would be based upon TIERS and on helping people interpret and work with the achievement gains already provided by the system. The other camp (the Fuzzies) held that the best strategy should put aside TIERS and instead help clients identify questions of greatest interest, involve people with different information needs (teachers, parents, school board members, etc.) and to holistically develop a full-scale-evaluation plan. This initial schism merely proved that verbal and philosophical differences do not necessarily lead to differences in action-- in fact, the materials produced by both camps looked suspiciously alike in several telling ways. First, the preliminary materials developed were almost all predicated on the hypothetical existence of achievement information which constituted the warning signal that something terribly wrong (or in the odd example, terribly right) was in the air. Secondly, too often the examples led to the conclusion that the hypothetical evaluation methodology itself was in error. Three fundamental and somewhat helpful truths began to emerge about working in the area loosely termed "evaluation for local use": (1) a discussion about evaluation information that can prove helpful at the local level may be best focused upon some kinds of preliminary results, in the Title I case a discussion of the results after applying a TIERS model; (2) all too often, evaluation merely leads us to correct faulty evaluation methodology and stops a bit short of inferring about program effects; and (3) in order to reconcile the patterns that emerge from consideration of the first two points, a reasonable conclusion is that "locally useful" evaluation is something that cannot spring into existence but rather evolves from several years of implementing and assessing a system, making revisions when deficiencies become apparent and

inferring about program effects only after carefully reviewing alternative explanations.

Since the Technical Assistance Centers are contractually forbidden from advising SEAs or LEAs in the area of program or curriculum revision, the materials and strategies we have developed through the USOE-sponsored technical assistance program carefully avoid prescribing any such action. But it is nonetheless an interesting area to consider, since we feel that the TACs, indeed even the TIERS, have had a noticable impact on evaluation practice and procedures, and has contributed greatly to "local utility".

Let us examine more closely what one might mean when saying that an evaluation has "utility." Braskamp and Brown (1980) present two clear alternative conceptions of utility. The first and, they claim, the most common view of what is meant by utility states that use should be measured by the degree to which evaluation has immediate and direct influence resulting in specific decisions on program allocations and changes. In this view of utilization, the consequences of having conducted an evaluation and reported its results must be obvious and must clearly lead to change; if this does not happen, it is implied that the evaluation has not been used. One could think of this position as the "Big-Bang Theory of Evaluation Use." The educational program cosmos must fundamentally change as a result of the evaluation findings. This is a strong position, and at times seems to be simultaneously advocated and rejected by those writing in the area. For example, Weiss (1972) has stated of evaluation, that "... unless it gains serious hearing when program decisions are made, it fails in its major purpose." (p.319) Clearly, this seems to favor the Big-Bang view of evaluation use. However, in the same paper she differentiates three major types of use, one of which-- "use within an on-going program, to improve its operation

as it goes along" -- is clearly not congruent with the Big-Bang view. Perhaps this all-or-none viewpoint is meant only to apply to summative evaluations, since formative evaluation, by design, attempts to provide continuous and timely information on the procedural factors associated with implementing and maintaining a program. A statement more likely associated with the all-or-none, Big-Bang theory of evaluation use is provided by Jaeger (1979). In discussing the effects of test selection on mean NCE gains corresponding to fixed percentile rank gains, he notes disparity among various tests and concludes, "One would hope that an average mean 'loss' of 1 NCE unit on the CAT would receive the same policy treatment as an average mean 'gain' of 2 NCE units of the SRA Achievement Series...." (p.39). If by "policy treatment" is meant policy decision, one could argue that this statement is indicative of a Big-Bang attitude of evaluation use. If the Big-Bang phenomenon held, it would be obvious and, as Braskamp and Brown note, measuring the extent to which evaluative data is used would not be terribly difficult.

The alternative attitude toward evaluation use views utilization in a larger context, taking into account "making relevant audiences more aware of the program, its context, and the constraints under which it was funded, implemented and amenable to alterations..." (Braskamp and Brown, 1980; p.viii). This view or attitude toward utility could be referred to as the Little-Bang Theory.

The Little-Bang view of evaluation use, that impact is incremental and gradual, isn't very exciting. It holds that evaluative information represents only one of many differentially weighted cues that enter into instructional and programmatic decisions. This makes the role of evaluation more difficult to examine because now a host of other factors become important: the organizational structure of the educational agency, the role that the

evaluator is seen filling in the program being evaluated, the self-perception of the evaluator, the characteristics of the potential audiences, the interpersonal relationship between the evaluator and all parties concerned, and, particularly and most overlooked, the very subtle use of evaluation-type information in contributing to decisions made either about the program or about the educational future of children in the program, must all be taken into consideration in determining the extent of evaluation utility.

An interesting perspective on this view of evaluation use is given by Alkin (1980). He examined evaluation utility via naturalistic research methods, focusing on either Title I or Title IVC projects. Particular attention was paid to identifying key actors in the evaluation process, documenting how the evaluation fit into the total operation of the school program, and the way in which the evaluation influenced decisions made about the program. Concerning mandated evaluation tasks, he states ... "While the evaluator faces many mandated tasks, there is nonetheless a surprising amount of discretion in dealing with them." (p.25) He states that in a number of instances, local evaluators were able to "... comply with state reporting requirements, conform to the district's evaluation policies and, at the same time, devote considerable attention to the concerns of local program personnel." (p.25).

Alkin's research points out that the nature and extent of evaluation utility may depend very much on sundry conditions existing in any educational agency or institution, and that certain conditions must exist before any evaluative data is likely to be used, and even then the utilization may not be obvious.

For example, the TACs have been working intensively since 1976 on assisting LEAs to select tests that are appropriate in terms of difficulty and in terms of content. In many places, scoring and reporting procedures

have been reviewed and upgraded. The result of this effort has been most profound on the individual Title I student who, perhaps for the first time, has been selected for Title I and diagnosed for particular instructional services on the basis of an instrument that provided valid information on the child's true abilities and needs. While subtle, this effect has perhaps been one of the major impacts of the technical assistance effort, though it is little discussed as an evaluation issue.

The research of Alkin, and others, points to a serious lack of insight and understanding on how decisions are made and what sources of information are used in making them. Furthermore, using evaluative information in decision making is not only a function of the organizational dynamics of education agencies and the technical quality of the data. It is also obviously dependent on the size of the decision-space, that is, the set of all possible changes that could be made given program regulations and constraints at the State and local level. The implication of a restricted decision-space for utilization of evaluative data is obvious. Program policies, as reflected by regulations, not only have implications for the development of evaluation models, they also have substantial implications for the set of allowable decisions that can be made based on any data. Title I regulations may always call for the supplementing of educational services provided by local school systems, and while research or evaluation data may suggest alternative methods of delivering these services, it is doubtful that decision-makers will act on any such alternative that might be viewed by program auditors as a supplanting activity.

Because there is so much to learn about both the organizational structure and dynamics of educational settings that undoubtedly affect the way evaluative information is used, it would appear to be platitudinous to hail the cause of local utility lacking so much vital information. If

decision making is, as David Cohen views it, "... a euphemism for the allocation of resources -- money, position, authority, etc." then having an extensive knowledge about the internal workings of local agencies would seem to be a logical prerequisite for studying evaluation utilization which in turn is a prerequisite for making propositions about whether data from any source is either usable or used.

Regarding the technical quality of data that make it usable, it should be understood that there is no dearth of technical, logistical or conceptual problems awaiting the development of any evaluation/reporting system. Many of the issues raised and discussed throughout the development of TIERS will be issues that confront the serious evaluator at the local and State level, no matter what methodologies are considered.

The TIERS, if viewed as more than just a set of reporting forms and three models, could be considered as the core of a general evaluation system, at least specifically in Title I, where the basic objectives of improvement in reading and mathematics skills are virtually universal across programs. The RMC models, or any others developed for local use, will have to be influenced by the substantive nature of the Title I program as reflected in program regulations. This means responding to the requirements and consequences of having to conduct a needs assessment as a part of planning, of having to design a program that supplements services rather than supplanting them, or of having to select the neediest pupils as project participants even in the trial trial phase of a project. All of these factors will dictate something about the form of most any model developed to evaluate the effectiveness of Title I projects no matter what cognitive or affective measures are used.

In addition, it appears to be platitudinous to hail the cause of local utility without advancing the cause of the accompanying technical rigor in obtaining correct information on which decisions will be made. Lacking this

evaluative data is likely to be used in much the same manner as a drunk uses a lightpost, for support rather than for illumination.

Before closing, it is worth re-emphasizing that TIERS is not a static entity. With the mandated implementation of the USOE models in 1979, a new provision allowing Title I evaluations to be conducted in a representative sample of a State's LEAs was created. (Interestingly, about as many SEAs chose not to sample as decided to sample.) Perhaps at next year's AERA convention, there will be a symposium on comparative uses of Title I evaluation data from sampled versus unsampled projects. The option of using the USOE models in only a third of a State's LEAs provides an opportunity to study the evaluation practices surrounding TIERS-based and alternative systems. The fact that that student sampling has been implemented within the TIERS provides some additional opportunities for comparative analysis among evaluation systems and further illustrates how the system can evolve in response to local needs.

In summation, to claim that USOE has instituted the TIERS as its sole vehicle for guaranteeing that useful Title I evaluation information is collected at the local, state and Federal levels is to engage in platitudes. We have spent a tremendous amount of time and effort working cooperatively with State and local administrators to develop materials that go beyond the natural boundaries of TIERS. It is similarly platitudinous to claim that TIERS has no local utility; it is a statement reflecting a political, and not an actual, interpretation. Though only locally supported initiatives can result in truly sweeping program reforms (and even then the "decision-space" is defined by regulations, traditions, etc.), subtle yet often important influences and revisions on program operations have been brought about through the implementation of the TIERS and through the efforts of the TACs. USOE has demonstrated a commitment to providing Title I evaluation data that can play an important part in program decisions; hope-

fully, this will prove true at all three levels of the Title I program hierarchy. This commitment manifests itself not only through the provision of models and TACs, but through the publication of the Title I evaluation technical standards. The concepts and procedures of the technical standards, recently incorporated into the draft version of the evaluation regulations, are unprecedented in explicitly defining the areas of technical rigor, and the rationale behind these choices, which locally conducted evaluations will have to aspire to.

While Title I is still a drama-filled arena, most of the energies which had early on been expended in debate over the TIERS' merits are now being channeled into constructive work on improving the quality and utility of the evaluations. The gains have been substantial and encouraging, and as we learn more about what works and what doesn't in evaluation, we hope to create a future for Title I evaluation that reflects little of its past.

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